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THE DINERS CLUB MAGAZINE

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OUR COVER

With his constructed painting on wood and
burlap, artist Homer Hill achieves a three-
dimensional effect and projects the carnival
spirit of London's Portobello Road.

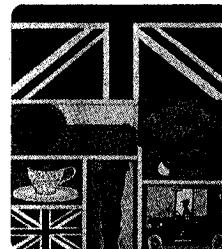


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Six-Second Hero

THE SHORT SHORT/by Jack Ritchie

Before the meeting adjourned, the post commander announced that the auxiliary had prepared refreshments.

Thelen and I stepped outside for a smoke first. The moon shone bright and his eyes went to the front of the white frame building. "Jennings-Stark Post No. 4314. Who was Jennings?"

"World War I vet," I said.

Thelen didn't need to ask about Stark. He puffed on his cigarette. "Never thought I'd come here. But there was this convention only 40 miles away and"

"What are you doing these days?"

He smiled tightly. "I became a lawyer. You don't need two hands for that."

My eyes went automatically to his gloved left hand, and once again my thoughts turned to Ed Stark. Stark and I had never been buddies, but in a small town you see almost everybody every day. We graduated from high school together in 1944. Shortly after, Stark and I and 20 others took the same bus to the induction center. Then came basic training and assignments and transfers. After a while, Stark's face was the only familiar one in my company.

Stark was one of the eager ones, confident and cocky, and the war was an adventure in killing. I was in the Army because it was the only place to be at a time like that, and I looked forward to the end of it all.

The time came when we were shipped overseas and into combat, and soon we began needing replacements. It was Newell, the company clerk, who filled us in about one of the new men.

"His name's Thelen," Newell said. "He's a pianist."

Stark wasn't impressed. "So he plays the piano."

"I mean a real concert pianist. Carnegie Hall and stuff. Used to tour the country from coast to coast, and was one of those child prodigies."

I recalled then, but Stark said, "Never heard of him."

"It was his own idea to transfer to a combat outfit," Newell said. "He had a nice soft spot, but I guess he didn't want it that way."

Thelen proved to be a small, quiet man who got as scared as most of us, but he never complained.

The end of the war was in sight the day we entered the village—just a dozen or so houses along one street, its people evacuated by the Germans. Perhaps it had been on someone's battle map, but plans change, and the fighting had passed it by without disturbing a brick.

Our company, in 2½-ton trucks, paused only long enough to drop off the three of us—Stark, Thelen and me. We had been detailed to wait for the rest of the battalion.

After the trucks disappeared, we wandered through the houses until we came to the piano. Thelen stared at it, then slipped out of his pack and sat down to play.

I watched him as he played and I could see that this was his life—this keyboard and the sounds it could make. Stark eased himself into an armchair and dozed off.

None of us heard them. But suddenly they were there.

The German lieutenant stood just inside the doorway, his Walther pistol drawn, and behind him the men of 20 his patrol. There was nothing for us to do but put up our

hands. The Germans woke up Stark and disarmed him.

"You may now put down your hands," the lieutenant said. He was young, perhaps only a few years older than we were, and he looked tired.

He spoke careful English. "You play well. Very well."

Thelen accepted the compliment and made a polite response. "You play the piano, too?"

The lieutenant shook his head. "No. The violin. But even then I am not on the concert level, such as you. I played at home in the evenings for entertainment with my brother and sister." He was silent for a moment. "But this is no more. My brother was killed in North Africa."

He put the pistol back in its holster and sighed. "This war, it is almost over. At this moment you are my prisoners. In a few hours, possibly we will be yours. Perhaps I should even surrender to you now." He looked toward his men. Some of them, dead tired, slumped on the davenport. The others leaned wearily against the walls.

"Our company passed through here half an hour ago," Thelen said. "The rest of the battalion will be here soon."

The lieutenant studied him and then nodded slowly. "Yes, I believe you. We are indeed a lost patrol."

His men watched him. Perhaps they understood English. They seemed to be waiting.

He ran a hand along the back of his neck. "Yes, I think it is over, this war. All over. There is no longer any point in postponing"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Stark suddenly dart toward one of the Germans and snatch the Schmeisser submachine gun from his hands. I shouted, but it was too late, and I dived for the floor.

It lasted no more than five or six seconds. Only one of the Germans had time to use his weapon. He fired one short burst before he was cut down.

And then there was the awful silence and the dead men—even those who had tried to put up their hands.

Stark stood in the middle of the room, his eyes glittering. "Eight of them," he said. "I got all eight."

I looked up at Thelen. Blood flowed from the mangled left hand and his eyes were wide with shock. "It was unnecessary," he almost whispered. "So unnecessary."

And then he wrenched the pistol from the dead lieutenant's holster, pointed it at Stark and pulled the trigger.

Thelen might have been reading my mind. "I killed him then," he said. "As far as I was concerned, I killed him."

Yes, I thought. *If the intention is the deed, you killed Stark.* But the lieutenant's gun had not been loaded. Perhaps he had not wanted to kill anyone, even in war.

We listened to the voices from the hall. "When I came here, I thought I'd find Stark alive," Thelen said.

I shook my head. "No. It was one of those traffic accidents. A week after he came back home he was hit by a car while crossing Main Street."

Thelen's eyes suddenly flickered, and after a long moment he asked: "Who was the driver?"

I ground the cigarette butt under my artificial foot. "I was," I said. ☺